UNITED
NATIONS

E

Economic and Social
Council

Distr.
GENERAL

E/CN.4/2000/NGO/106
17 February 2000

ENGLISH
Original: FRENCH

COMMISSION ON HUMAN RIGHTS
Fifty-sixth session
Item 11 (c) of the provisional agenda

CIVIL AND POLITICAL RIGHTS, INCLUDING THE QUESTION OF FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Written statement* submitted by Reporters sans frontières - International
a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement, which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[1 February 2000]

---

* This written statement is issued, unedited, as received from the submitting non-governmental organization.

Press freedom is non-existent in some 20 countries with a total population of 2 billion; in almost 70 others it is precarious. A total of 36 journalists were killed while doing their jobs in 1999. More than 80 of their colleagues are currently in prison for attempting to work without interference.

In Burma, freedom of expression is still non-existent. As of 1 February 2000, at least 12 journalists were rotting in jail. U Win Tin, aged 70, was arrested in 1989 and sentenced to 15 years' imprisonment. San San Nweh, a journalist and writer, was sentenced in 1994 to seven years' imprisonment for "spreading misinformation", and to another three years for passing information about conditions of detention to the United Nations Special Rapporteur for Burma.

In Burkina Faso, the murderers of Norbert Zongo, the editor of the weekly publication L'Indépendant, are still at large. On 13 December 1998 his body was found in his burnt-out vehicle together with the corpses of three of his companions. On 7 May 1999, an independent commission of inquiry set up by the authorities to determine the cause of the journalist's death concluded that "the motive for his murder should be sought in the deceased's inquiries into the death of the driver of François Campoaré", the President's brother. The Commission named six "likely" suspects, all belonging to the Presidential security regiment. As of 1 February 2000, none of these suspects had been charged with the journalist's murder, and François Campoaré had still not been asked to provide evidence by the investigating judge handling the case.

In China, the Government continues to restrict press freedom. In 1999 the authorities banned five publications and held more than 45 foreign journalists for questioning. They have also cracked down on the dissemination of information through the Internet. Two "cyber dissidents" are currently in detention, and the law now states that any Internet user who publishes "State secrets", a particularly vague concept, is liable to imprisonment. As of 1 February 2000, nine journalists were behind bars serving long prison sentences.

In Cuba, where the Constitution stipulates that "freedom of speech is subject to the ends of socialist society", only the official press is tolerated. About 100 independent journalists working for a dozen unofficial news agencies are subject to constant harassment. This repression has been stepped up in recent months. Last year, four independent journalists were forced into exile, 50 were held for questioning and 41 have been placed under house arrest. On 1 February 2000, four journalists were in prison in Cuba.

On 1 February 2000, 10 journalists were behind bars in Ethiopia, the highest number in any African country. Some of them have spent almost three years in prison, where their conditions of detention are particularly harsh.

When it comes to freedom of the press, the Democratic Republic of the Congo is one of the most repressive regimes in Africa. Journalists here have experienced every variety of censorship. Since Laurent-Desiré Kabila came to power in May 1997, more than 100 journalists have been imprisoned for varying periods. Others have been ill-treated, in some cases even

flogged. Media outlets have been seized and temporarily closed down, newspapers burnt and their premises ransacked. Foreign journalists have been deported and international radio broadcasts are prohibited. As of 1 February 2000, two journalists were still in detention in Kinshasa.

Central Asian Governments continue to drift towards totalitarianism. The wave of repression in Uzbekistan reached its height in February 1999 following an unsuccessful attempt to assassinate President Islam Karimov, thought to have been the work of Wahabi Muslims. On 1 February 2000, two journalists were still behind bars for "insulting" officials, and there are widespread accounts of ill-treatment in Uzbek prisons. Freedom of the press is far from secure in Kazakhstan, which has passed tougher laws on private media outlets. The position of the press is precarious in Tajikistan. In Turkmenistan, the press has been completely muzzled following the re-election of President Sapamurad Niyazov as President for life at the end of 1999.

In Serbia, an influential independent journalist was murdered outside his home and one of his colleagues was imprisoned for displaying a placard calling for freedom of the press during the bombing by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The very restrictive Information Act adopted in October 1998 is still being used to muzzle a free press. In 1999, the courts imposed some 30 fines totalling over 20 million dinars (1.7 million euros). At least a dozen independent radio and television stations, six dailies and a weekly newspaper have been forced to close down.

The beginning of 1999 was a dark chapter for the press in Sierra Leone. Between 6 and 12 January 1999, insurgents from the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) engaged in a full-scale operation to eliminate journalists with close links to the authorities. At least nine journalists were killed and many were forced into hiding or obliged to flee the country. More than a dozen journalists were imprisoned in 1999. The Minister of Information has tried on a number of occasions to enact new, more repressive regulations regarding freedom of the press.

There is no free press in the Syrian Arab Republic, which has the highest number of imprisoned journalists in any country in the Middle East. On 1 February 2000, 10 journalists were in detention for non-violent activities such as presumed membership of banned political or human rights groups. They were all tried in camera and sentenced to between 8 and 15 years' imprisonment. Their conditions of detention are particularly harsh; torture and ill-treatment are routine occurrences, and they do not receive the medical care they require.

In Turkey, despite the commitments made by the Government of Bülent Ecevit, pressure of the media has not been relaxed. One journalist has been killed, 7 imprisoned, 26 attacked and 4 tortured by State officials. They include Aydogan Inal, a journalist on the staff of the pro-Kurdish weekly newspaper Hêvi. He was forced to undress and sing the Turkish national anthem while being sprayed with icy water. He was then kicked in the testicles and throttled. At least 19 other journalists spent time in prison in 1999. On 1 February 2000 four were still behind bars.

In Tunisia censorship is a key element of the police State established by President Ben Ali. The tight control of the system is founded on fear and corruption. The authorities impose their will through direct repression - such as administrative instructions, seizures and threats - and also through "rewards" such as subsidies for newspapers and advertising budgets. The few journalists who dare to demonstrate their independence are subject to constant harassment by the authorities. A good example is Taoufik Ben Brick, correspondent of the French daily newspaper La Croix: his telephone has been tapped, his mail confiscated, and members of his family have been threatened.

In Viet Nam, the Communist regime retains its iron grip on the country's media. In May 1999, the National Assembly adopted a new Press Act which gives the Ministry of Culture and Information unlimited powers to control the media and the Internet. Journalists are liable to prison sentences for "defamation" and "spreading misinformation". On 1 February 2000, four journalists were behind bars in Viet Nam.